

UMBANDA ENTITIES' IMAGINARY: DILEMAS IN SHARED AESTHETICS OVER
PLASTER IMAGES*O IMAGINÁRIO DAS ENTIDADES DA UMBANDA: DILEMAS NAS ESTÉTICAS
COMPARTILHAS SOBRE AS IMAGENS EM GESSO**EL IMAGINARIO DE LAS ENTIDADES UMBANDA: DILEMA EN LA ESTÉTICA
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SOUZA, P. R. de. Umbanda entities' imaginary: dilemas in shared aesthetics over plaster images. **Rev. Cadernos de Campo**, Araraquara, v. 24, n. esp. 1, e024007, 2024. e-ISSN: 2359-2419. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47284/cdc.v24iesp.1.18214>



| Submitted: 30/06/2023

| Revisions required: 15/12/2023

| Approved: 02/04/2024

| Published: 30/09/2024

Editors: Prof. Dr. Maria Teresa Miceli Kerbauy
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ABSTRACT: The study of the evolution of plaster images of Umbanda entities, sold in religious goods stores, including a brief history of its most expressive manufacturer (Imagens Bahia), reveals social and behavioral changes over time. The images of the so-called left-wing entities, exus and Pomba-giras, reflect dilemmas involving the exposure of sexuality and a certain degree of zoomorphism. At the same time, the different opinions of devotees on whether to cover the breasts of Pomba-giras in statues and represent exus with the bodily parts of animals challenges the manufacturer/designer to reconcile such divergences in the production of statues, having to update them from time to time without losing tradition. This research reveals that a combination of spiritual revelation and social construction determines the imagination of Umbanda entities. Regarding agency, there is a dialectical process in which sometimes believers are influenced by the plaster representations, and sometimes devotees determine them.

KEYWORDS: Umbanda. Religious materialities. Religious images. Agency of objects. Religious goods stores.

RESUMO: O estudo da evolução das imagens em gesso de entidades da umbanda, comercializadas em lojas de artigos religiosos, incluindo uma breve história de seu fabricante mais expressivo (Imagens Bahia), revela mudanças sociais e comportamentais ao longo do tempo. As imagens das chamadas entidades de esquerda, exus e Pomba-giras, refletem dilemas envolvendo a exposição da sexualidade e certo grau de zoomorfização. Ao mesmo tempo, as diferentes opiniões dos devotos sobre cobrir ou não os seios das Pomba-giras em estátuas e representar exus com partes corpóreas de animais desafiam o fabricante/designer a conciliar tais divergências na produção das estátuas, tendo de atualizá-las de tempos em tempos, mas sem perder de vista a tradição. A pesquisa revela que uma combinação de revelação espiritual e construção social determinam o imaginário das entidades de umbanda. Em relação à agência constata-se um processo dialético em que ora fiéis são influenciados pelas representações em gesso, ora são os fiéis que as determinam.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Umbanda. Materialidades religiosas. Imagens religiosas. Lojas de artigos religiosos.

RESUMEN: El estudio de la evolución de las imágenes en yeso de entidades umbandistas, vendidas en tiendas de artículos religiosos, incluyendo una breve historia de su fabricante más significativo (Imagens Bahia), revela cambios sociales y comportamentales a lo largo del tiempo. Las imágenes de las denominadas entidades de izquierda, exus y Pomba-giras, reflejan dilemas de exposición de la sexualidad y cierto grado de animalización. Al mismo tiempo, las diferentes opiniones de los devotos sobre si cubrir o no los pechos de las Pomba-giras en las estatuas y representar a los exus con partes del cuerpo de animales desafían al fabricante/diseñador a conciliar tales diferencias en la producción de las estatuas, debiendo actualizarlas de vez en cuando, pero sin perder de vista la tradición. La investigación revela que una combinación de revelación espiritual y construcción social determina el imaginario de las entidades de la Umbanda. En relación con la agencia, hay un proceso dialéctico en que a veces los creyentes están influenciados por las representaciones en yeso, y otras veces son los fieles quienes las determinan.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Umbanda. Materialidades religiosas. Imágenes religiosas. Tiendas de artículos religiosos.

Introduction

Religious goods stores (stores selling artifacts for ritual use in Afro-Brazilian religions) have always caught my attention. During my daily commutes through the city of São Paulo, I frequently pass by several of these stores. A keen observer knowledgeable about African-based religions can trace the liturgical calendar simply by observing their storefronts. For example, in April, images of *Ogum* and Saint George become abundant, along with mannequins dressed in the saint's attire for mediums who embody him. Not only do the variations in storefront displays provide information, but also the changes in the consumption of these items, which in turn require stores and manufacturers to innovate with new forms and products, reflecting societal changes impacting these religions.

The trigger for a more in-depth investigation was the proliferation of plaster images of the so-called *malandras*, female entities within the malandros line, led by the well-known entity *Zé Pilintra*. His image is always present in stores selling Afro-Brazilian religious artifacts, placed at the entrance to attract customers and prosperity. Although *Zé Pilintra* and other *malandros*² have long been present, the visibility of *malandras* seemed to be lower until at least 2019. One indication of this was the lack of plaster images of *malandras* for sale in religious goods stores.

Figure 1 – Plaster images of *malandras* for sale in religious goods stores



Source: Author's collection, 2023.

² One who does not work, who uses ingenious, often reprehensible resources to live; lazy.

To confirm this impression, I interviewed a prominent manufacturer in the field to determine whether these images were indeed newly developed. I ended up finding an interesting source of information about the dynamics of the Umbanda religion. While other African-based religions might also benefit from this research method, this article focuses specifically on Umbanda. Thus, the article aims to investigate changes in the Umbanda imagination through the study of plaster images representing its entities.

The presented case study involves systematic visits to the traditional Casa de Velas Santa Rita (CVSR), located in the Liberdade neighborhood in central São Paulo, and the factory producing religious plaster statues and store Imagens Bahia (IB), located on Avenida Aricanduva in São Paulo's eastern zone. It also includes interviews with Henrique Dias, heir and manager of IB. Until 2018, CVSR and IB operated as a single entity. Currently, they function independently, though CVSR continues to resell images produced by IB. The history of these institutions can be seen as a chapter in the history of Umbanda in São Paulo; however, they now reach all over Brazil and other countries, where images are sold both in physical stores and online. IB also manufactures images of Catholic saints but faces competition from various manufacturers, including Chinese ones. In the segment of Afro-Brazilian entity images, IB stands out as the leading and oldest manufacturer in Brazil.

Showing old photos, Henrique recounts that, around the 1930s, his grandfather, *Senhor Nelson Ferreira Dias Rodrigues*, had a dairy located at *Praça da Liberdade*, next to the Church of the Hanged Men. The church, still standing, has an old candle shop that was once very busy. People came from various places to light candles for their saints. At the time, the candles were made with beef tallow, making it easy and convenient for Senhor Nelson's dairy to sell candles. The candle business eventually surpassed the dairy business, leading to the establishment of CVSR in 1934. It wasn't long before they transitioned from selling candles to selling images. Devotees who used to buy candles at CVSR began asking Senhor Nelson to bring images, initially of Catholic saints. At first, Senhor Nelson only bought and resold images, but later he hired artisans and began manufacturing them. A bit later, discreetly (due to the persecution faced by African-based religions during the *Vargas Era*), requests for images of entities manifested in Umbanda started to appear. According to Henrique, the first *Umbanda* image requested from his grandfather was that of a caboclo, followed by images of old black men (*pretos velhos*). The "left-hand" lines, *exus*, and *Pomba-giras* came much later.

The business grew, as did Senhor Nelson's relationships with devotees and priests. The images mediated not only the sacred but also social relations. Senhor Nelson was a member of

the Rotary Club and was known to several military personnel and police officers. At a time when Afro-Brazilian religions required registration and authorization to operate (see BROWN *et al.*, 1985), many of their rituals were criminalized, and their priests were imprisoned. Henrique recounts that Senhor Nelson was able to mediate and facilitate the release of spiritist priests who knew him through CVSR. The increase in demand for images necessitated more space; thus, in 1956, CVSR became solely a store, and the factory, now called Imagens Bahia, moved to *Avenida Aricanduva*.

Years later, a viaduct was constructed, and the factory's land was expropriated. The solution was to retain a small plot of land as a store in the same area, while the factory moved to Ferraz de Vasconcelos, though expanded. Senhor Nelson passed away in 2008, but his son, Nelson Ferreira Dias, continued the business and now manages it along with his son, Henrique Dias, who holds a degree in advertising and marketing and handles the portfolio and promotion of products. Henrique is primarily responsible for deciding on the creation and manufacturing of new products as well as the removal of images from production, while respecting requests, suggestions, and critiques from priests and devotees. The family is not affiliated with any Umbanda temple, although Henrique occasionally attends Umbanda centers.

From the beginning, the business showed its vocation for creating images based on spontaneous demand from the faithful, which remains the case today. Despite the company's significant growth, Henrique and the staff maintain close relationships with clients, always attentive to new trends and demands. Although it is a factory, IB still employs a highly artisanal process: before being produced on a larger scale, the development of the images requires sculptors. The pieces are all hand-painted. This allows IB to produce exclusive pieces as well as develop products for mass production when orders begin to come in from various retailers and/or directly from devotees. Given the company's national reach, the analysis of sales and production demands provides insights into religious and social trends and transformations. Not only do the images produced and sold reflect these dynamics, but so does the volume and destinations of sales. For example, Henrique reveals that the highest volume of sales of Umbanda entity images currently occurs in the southern region of the country. Based on this and other information, I identified the investigation of the religious image market as an excellent source of research on materiality. Images can be considered "biographical objects" (Hoskins, 1998), as they tell the stories of entities, sometimes of mediums, and frequently of Umbanda itself, while also embodying their cultural biographies (Kopytoff, 1986).

This investigation is part of a broader research project; however, due to the limited space of the article, I will focus on how images emerge and how the production of plaster images mediates the imagery of Umbanda entities for the faithful.

Plaster Images and Aesthetic Formation in *Umbanda*

Umbanda, or *Umbandas*, as it might be more appropriately called, presents significant diversity regarding the lines of entities worshiped and the ways these entities are represented and venerated. This includes both the statues placed on altars or in spiritual settings and the manner in which mediums dress during the embodiment of these entities. Whether the *Umbanda* temples are more Christianized or more Africanized, the use of images is one of the many material elements that contribute to the construction of the imagery associated with the *Umbanda* pantheon.

This is particularly evident in the case of entities not related to Christianity, such as *orixás*, *caboclos*, *pretos-velhos*, *exus*, and *Pomba-giras*, compared to the Christian imagery, which has been established for a longer time and is thus more naturalized (e.g., the image of Christ as a blonde with blue eyes, although not European, rarely causes astonishment among the faithful). While there is a considerable amount of literature on *Umbanda* entities, there are no official doctrines with widely accepted descriptions and principles, resulting in many variations, both mythological and imagistic. Nonetheless, commonalities mainly refer to material aspects that, in a way, define more precise contours for *Umbanda* practice while highlighting its immanence.

[To] be experienced as real, imaginations must become tangible beyond the realm of ideas, through the creation of a social environment that materializes them via the structuring of space, architecture, iconography, ritual performance, and the induction of bodily sensations (Meyer, 2019, p. 50, our translation).

Therefore, plaster images on the altars of *Umbanda* houses or in the homes of their devotees play an important formative role, as they induce not only bodily sensations but also a specific imagination about the entities.

On one hand, plaster images, when analyzed based on available information, condense and materialize stereotypes of well-defined spiritual lines that originated from socially marginalized groups with unique histories and experiences. Examples include: *pretos-velhos*, who are representations of the spirits of enslaved Africans; *caboclos*, who symbolize the

indigenous people who were decimated or colonized; and malandros, associated with samba, bohemian lifestyles, and macumba practices, often marginalized for their alternative way of life.

Each of these spiritual groups has developed characteristic virtues over time, such as courage in facing enemies, resignation in the face of suffering, overcoming adversity through joy, resistance, and resilience, among others. Based on these specific attributes, these lines perform distinct spiritual functions to assist the faithful, including counseling, resolving romantic conflicts, physical, mental, and emotional healing rituals, breaking curses, spiritual cleansings, material balance, and more.

On the other hand, the images of these spiritual lineages embody objective aesthetic aspects: typified images of the feminine and masculine, age, skin color, body posture, physical stereotypes (the warrior Indian, the sensual woman, the old black man, etc.), clothing, accessories, and other items used in daily activities, which tell stories, define roles, and provide models that inspire ways of being. Although the most explicit goal of acquiring statues is to revere the beloved saints, there are identifications with the images that lead to shared aesthetics. We build ourselves through our relationship with things; thus, these "things" can offer clues about us and our culture (Souza, 2022).

As a relatively new religion under the banner of Umbanda, it is less common to find people whose primary aesthetic-religious formation is Umbanda. More frequently, Catholics and Spiritists transition to Umbanda or identify with both. In these cases, not only do ideas (beliefs) change, but a new aesthetic must be incorporated. Generally, devotees attempt to establish connections between symbols and practices from both traditions. The presence of Christian elements and Spiritist vocabulary (such as medium and obsessors, among others) may initially suggest an easier transition. However, the shift from a "conceptual aesthetic formation" based on written doctrines to one grounded in oral traditions, where transmission predominantly occurs through bodily practices, has a significant impact. It represents a fundamental change in epistemological approach. While the former approach is more mentalistic and places bodily impressions in the background, the latter is more sensory and requires a rearrangement of perceptual modes, integrating body and mind on the same plane.

In other words, cognitive transmission in "doctrinal religions" (Whitehouse, 2004) primarily occurs through reflection on ideas derived from texts and frequent repetition of these same contents, with minimal bodily activity and low emotional stimulation. In contrast, "imagistic religions" (Whitehouse, 2004), typically derived from oral traditions, tend to

generate a type of cognitive transmission that emphasizes non-verbal bodily experience — sensations and emotions. In his didactic division between “doctrinal and imagistic religions,” Whitehouse (2004) categorizes religions based on their aesthetics (although he does not use this term) into two ideal types that may oversimplify their complexity. However, his typology is useful for highlighting patterns of differences and similarities in the aesthetic formations produced by different religions.

Umbanda exhibits more characteristics of an imagistic religion, though it also has doctrinal moments, which vary in frequency depending on the practices of the house. The fact that devotees (mediums) *incorporate* entities, or that ‘assistants’ (as those seeking guidance are called) can interact with spirits manifesting through mediums’ bodies, reinforces “the ways in which imaginations are materialized and experienced as real, and not merely as interchangeable representations located in the mind” (Meyer, 2019, p. 53). This aspect, present in various African-derived religions, underscores the importance of plaster images that aim to materialize a visual form of spiritual guides. These forms are often taken by many devotees as the true presence of the entity rather than merely a symbol. Anthropologist Alfred Gell (2020) provides a helpful way to explain the presence of entities through images. They would represent spiritual entities in the same way an ambassador represents the governor of their country abroad.

The ideas of “representing” (as a figure) and ‘representing’ (as an ambassador) are distinct, yet connected. An ambassador is a space-time fragment separate from their nation, traveling abroad and interacting with foreigners’ as if they were speaking with their national government (Gell, 2020, p. 158, our translation).

The presence of entities through their images becomes even more real to devotees when such statues are “crossed” (a sanctification procedure that seems to increase the agency of both the entities and the image itself) by the entities when incorporated into mediums and then returned to the devotees to be placed on their domestic altars. There may also be other rituals for consecrating statues when they are intended for altars or sanctuaries within Umbanda houses. In this sense, images become alive, relativizing boundaries between people, things, animals, and supernatural entities, based on the potential agency that all can have (Souza, 2019). Generally, the procedures performed on the images, such as “crossing,” seem to have more practical relevance than the origin of the images, in the sense of which models were used to create them, at least in the case of most statues. However, as we will see later, some images appear to be beginning to raise questions. The hypothesis proposed is that devotees have been influenced by contemporary social discourses and movements, such as feminism. Before

analyzing this hypothesis, the next section will provide a detailed description of the image production process.

Sources for Image Production

The results of this research indicate that ideas for creating images blend aspects of spiritual revelation with social construction. Henrique mentioned several cases of devotees arriving with drawings or simply providing descriptions of the pieces they wanted made in plaster. Generally, these descriptions are quite specific and detailed, referring to an entity that may have manifested in a single *Terreiro* or several. Before the drawings, however, images of the spirits may come through mediums that incorporate them and “see” (as a mental image) how the entities appear. These images may also come in dreams. Additionally, some mediums claim to see spirits in a realistic manner, as if they were embodied persons.

There are also cases where the entity itself, embodied in the medium, describes to others how it appears, the ritual objects it uses, and sometimes mentions aspects of its earthly existence, such as its occupation, social standing, challenges it faced, and overcame. These accounts from the entities often provide the basis for a certain Umbandist theology. Its principles are derived from the lived experiences of the spirits, which, through the mediums, can be shared. A significant portion of the literature within the Umbanda bibliography consists of biographies of spiritual guides. It is these biographies (whether written or spoken), the manifestations in mediums, and the images that largely make Umbanda tangible in the sense proposed by Birgit Meyer (2019).

The most common cases regarding the origin of images appear to be mental images and dreams, where the entity allows itself to be seen by those who have the (mediumistic) capacity for such visions, a capacity considered an additional sense beyond the five conventional ones. The illustration below, provided to IB, exemplifies one of these processes, where a medium saw, described, and drew the image of the entity Mané Baiano.

Figure 2 – Drawing designated for the production of the plaster image of the entity *Mané Baiano*



Source: Henrique Dias, Imagens Bahia Collection (undated).

In addition to the drawing, there is a detailed description of the entity's physical attributes: dark-skinned, elderly, with white hair and eyebrows, barefoot, and with clenched fists. The phenotype reflects a popular social type among Brazilians: bare feet suggest humble origins; dark skin indicates mixed heritage; white hair and eyebrows reflect old age; and clenched fists may symbolize resistance. The simple and popular name, *Mané Baiano*, exemplifies someone who, like many spirits, lived in poverty and attained the status of a guiding entity in *Umbanda*. The image represents not an idealized saint, adorned with a crown and embellishments, but a human figure, possibly representative of the period during which it was embodied. Such simplicity facilitates devotees' identification with the images, making them more real and tangible to the human condition.

According to Henrique, some clients provide drawings, more or less elaborate, while others bring ready-made images, such as photographs, magazines, or websites, which serve as references for producing the plaster image. It is important to note that these ready-made images are not neutral; they carry specific intentions, ideologies, and aesthetic standards that may influence or update a particular tradition. In the case of the drawing above, the person who

received the information from the entity tried to adhere faithfully to the given instruction, without using an existing external reference. It is unclear whether the drawing was used to maintain fidelity to the received revelation, if the proposer could not find a reference image, or if the drawing precedes certain media.

In any case, two processes of image production are distinguished: one without external reference, possibly closer to spiritual revelation, as previously explained; and another that consists, at least in part, of a social construction, as it relies on some public media, typically secular and carrying ideologies and aesthetic standards from another field. Henrique points to this aspect by showing me the image of *Cabocla Jurema do Mar*, which, according to him, was referenced from a pin-up girl image and later adapted to what would initially be a Brazilian Indigenous stereotype.

Figure 3 – Plaster image of *Cabocla Jurema do Mar*, produced and sold by *Imagens Bahia*



Source: Company website. Available at: <https://www.imagensbahia.com.br/jurema-do-mar-cabocla-40cm>. Accessed on: 06/20/2023.

Each line of *Umbanda* seems to reflect varying degrees of external influence (such as media) according to different socio-historical contexts. Images of *caboclos* and *pretos-velhos*, with few exceptions, appear to have remained relatively stable in form, although over the years, more lines of *caboclos*, *caboclas*, *pretas-velhas*, and *pretos-velhos* have been added. In contrast,

within the analyzed universe of IB, other lines, such as *orixás*, *exus*, and *Pomba-giras*, have experienced more significant changes. These changes appear to be influenced by current discourses, such as anti-racism and feminist movements.

A notable example is the image of Iemanjá. Although an African deity, *Iemanjá* has historically been represented as a white woman with long, straight hair and light blue garments, resembling a depiction of Our Lady. This representation may have contributed to *Iemanjá* becoming the most popular *orixá*, often highlighted outside of African cults in popular imagination. In 2007, IB introduced a black image of *Iemanjá*, dressed in traditional *Candomblé* attire, in response to requests from devotees, including priests who asserted her Black African origins. These requests may have been influenced by Black movements in Brazil. However, Henrique states that the white image of *Iemanjá* is still significantly more sold.

Figure 4 – On the left, the traditional image of *Iemanjá* next to the black *Iemanjá* in *Candomblé* attire, displayed at *Casa de Velas Santa Rita*, produced by *Imagens Bahia*



Source: Author's collection, 2020.

Another case worth highlighting in terms of cultural biography (Kopytoff, 1986; Hoskins, 1998)—that is, a trajectory of changes over time through which one can discern the context—is the imagery of *Exus*. Henrique notes that early images of *exus* typically featured red skin, goat feet, tails, and horns. Over time, they lost these more stereotypical demonic features, such as animal parts.

Losing these characteristics, in this case, means that statues with more animalized features began to sell less and were eventually removed from production. Currently, IB produces a line of ninety different *exus*, of which only ten have horns, eight feature one or two goat feet, none have red skin (all have human skin color), and only two present a mix of animal and human traits: *Exu Cobra*, which now has a fully human version with a snake coiled around its legs, and *Exu Belzebu*, with goat-like legs and features. There are also fully human versions, such as the mediums incorporated: *Exu do Candomblé* and two versions of the *orixá Exu*.

Figure 5 – From left to right, *Exu Belzebu*, one of the “classics.” Humanized *Exu orixá*, *Exu orixá* with his tools and symbols, and the more Africanized *Exu* based on the photo by Pierre Verger



Source: Images taken from the Imagens Bahia catalog. Available at: https://www.imagensbahia.com.br/busca?category_id=73&term=exus&from=0&size=24. Accessed on: 05/03/2023.

Exus in *Umbanda* are not necessarily the same entities as the *Exu orixá* in *Candomblé*. However, representations of the *Exu orixá* in plaster are relatively more recent. Traditionally, in African cults, *Exu* would be represented, in the sense proposed by Alfred Gell, as an ambassador, through a stone or, at most, by a wooden statue carved according to a specific African aesthetic that does not seek to portray human forms realistically.

Henrique notes that over time, there have been requests for *exus* with less animalistic or demonic characteristics and more human-like features. This phenomenon can be explained by the growing recognition and reverence of *exus* in African-derived religions, which currently oppose the demonization of *Exu* by the Catholic Church. Requests for more human-like and, in a sense, less “monstrous” images of *Exu* have led Henrique to adjust the design of some pieces to meet this demand. The photo below illustrates, on the left, an *exu* head according to older

models, with large teeth, pointed ears, disproportionate eyes, prominent eyebrows, and a deformed face. On the right, a prototype of an *exu* according to current demands is shown, with an appearance that follows a secular standard of male beauty.

Figure 6 – Plaster head of *Exu*, before painting. On the left, the older version, and on the right, a new interpretation



Source: Author's collection, dated 04/14/2023.

The prototype is still under development; this is just one of the versions. Alongside the sculptors and molders at IB, Henrique has been studying how to modernize the image as requested while trying to maintain a certain tradition. During the research process for this project, I invited Henrique to attend one of my classes at PUC São Paulo and present to the students a bit about the world of producing and commercializing religious statues. He brought the two plaster *exu* heads shown in the photo above and shared some of his dilemmas with us. There were students practicing, researchers of African-derived religions, as well as Christian practitioners, all postgraduates in Religious Studies.

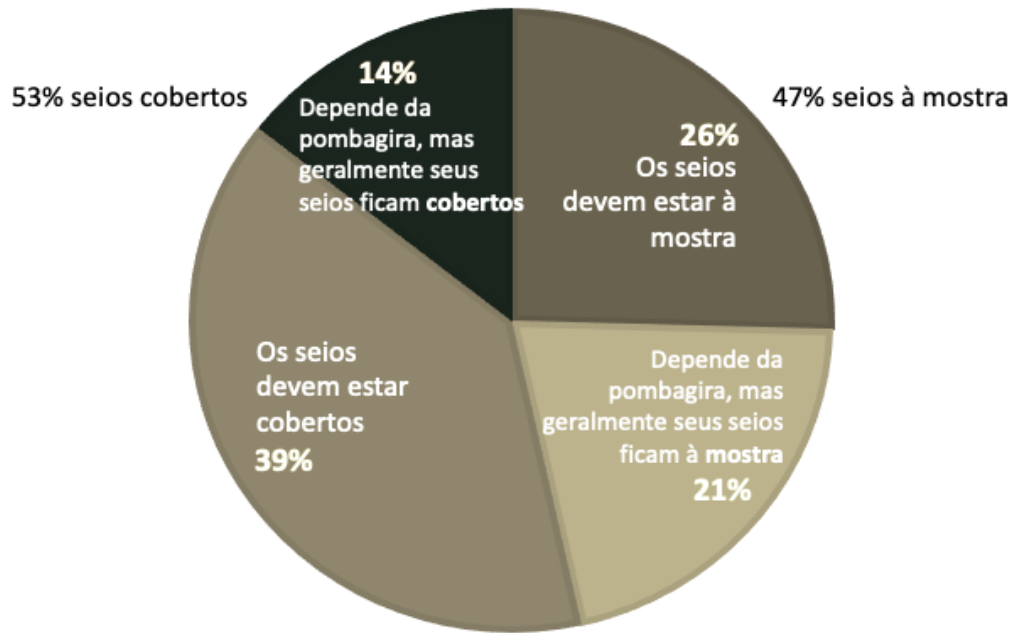
With varying levels of knowledge about Umbanda, the students temporarily assumed Henrique's perspective, leading to divided opinions. Christians and some followers of Afro-Brazilian religions agreed that the image of *Exu* should be presented in a more human form, arguing that the old representations reinforced the demonic connotation attributed to *Exu*. In contrast, some Umbandists valued tradition, arguing that many of the images had been revealed through mediumship by the entities themselves, and therefore, the traditional, more zoomorphic, and even demonic representations should be maintained. One student, a former Umbandist but still practicing African-derived religions, argued that representing *Exu* as “dashing as Clark Kent” (referring to the model on the right) would be yielding to a modern,

secular standard of male beauty that has nothing to do with the entity. There was a heated discussion during the class, but no definitive conclusion. Henrique listened attentively to all the arguments presented.

The discussion intensified further when Henrique presented a similar dilemma regarding the images of *Pomba-giras*. Their images have also demanded alterations over time, not exactly concerning their bodily form, but it appears that in the case of female entities, clothing and the degree of body exposure can be decisive for the accuracy of the representation and agency of the entity. The “classic” images of *Pomba-gira* depict them nearly nude, with their breasts exposed. Henrique reports that he has been asked to produce images that cover the breasts of the *Pomba-giras*. He suggests that covering the breasts relates to the influence of feminist movements that protest against the objectification of the female body. However, there is always controversy regarding changes to these images. In the classroom, once again, opinions were divided. During the discussion, the question arose: why must *Pomba-giras* be depicted naked while the phalluses of *exus* are covered? The traditionalist counterpoint argued once more that traditional images were determined by revelation and should be maintained as such. Some also argued that leftist lines aim to break norms, subvert expectations, and that *Pomba-gira* should present herself without fear of repression and thus remain depicted nude.

The classroom discussion was merely a smaller-scale demonstration of a crossroads that Henrique had already encountered: respecting religious tradition on one side and market appeal on the other. To address this dilemma more consistently, in 2013 Henrique allowed the public to weigh in by conducting a survey via Google Forms with the following question: should *Pomba-giras* have their breasts exposed or covered? The response options were: a) Breasts should be exposed; b) Breasts should be covered; c) It depends on the *Pomba-gira*, but generally, their breasts are exposed; d) It depends on the *Pomba-gira*, but generally, their breasts are covered. The survey received 420 responses, with the following distribution: a) = 106; b) = 163; c) = 88; d) = 60. For better visualization, see the graph below in percentage:

Graph 1 – Graph representing the responses from the survey via Google Forms



Source: Author's preparation. The Excel file with the responses was kindly provided by Henrique Dias. The respondents are not identifiable.

Analyzing the numbers objectively, it is observed that although the “breasts covered” option prevailed, the technical difference between the options is small, and the opinions discussed in the classroom also did not reach a majority consensus. Respondents had the freedom to choose among the options provided and could also express additional opinions if they wished. Among the spontaneous explanations, there is a concern to clarify to the lay public that, despite the nudity and sensuality associated with *Pomba-giras*, these entities should not be confused with prostitutes, and that *Exus* (often mentioned in responses as having a demonic appearance) are not demons. It is more evident that women identify with *Pomba-giras*, who seem to represent and materialize female empowerment. Those who support the option of covered breasts argue that *Pomba-giras* are naturally beautiful and strong and that exposing their breasts is unnecessary to express these qualities; on the contrary, such exposure could harm their image unnecessarily. Examples of arguments presented by those who favor covered breasts include:

They are striking young women, and there is no need to expose themselves to the point of leaving their breasts visible.

The images on the left resemble those of demons; I suggest creating other forms of art, such as a simple man dressed in black and a young woman in traditional attire. There is no need to depict them with red skin and exposed breasts, as if they were courtesans.

Demystifying the layperson's conception is a struggle for Umbanda. With *Pomba-gira*, it is even more challenging. We do not need images with exposed breasts; we need the firmness of these beautiful guardians. *Pomba-giras* are entities of light and great respect, and there is no need for sexual or sensual appeal whatsoever. Have you noticed that the better dressed they are, the more beautiful they appear?

The former image of *Pomba-gira* as a highly sensual woman has been clarified, and today we can see that they exude their sensuality through their way of being. I believe that the most important thing is to detach the image of *Pomba-giras* from associations with malignancy, sexualization, promiscuity, prostitution, etc.

If covering them prevents more Evangelicals from making foolish remarks, it is worthwhile. Otherwise, it is not. The images would be more beautiful and would not provoke as much prejudice from people who are new to the religion and lack knowledge about it.

Among the respondents who support the exposure of the breasts, they are often highlighted as an important element in expressing feminine beauty and strength. However, the primary argument presented by those who prefer the breasts exposed seems to be related to preserving tradition. Below are some statements in this regard:

I believe there is no problem with the *Pomba-gira* image having exposed breasts. After all, malice is in the human mind, and this is not synonymous with vulgarity but rather a representation of feminine womanhood. In my view, it depends on the *Pomba-gira*, but I believe that those who appear with their breasts exposed are very powerful, as they embody the essence of life, which nourishes newborns and adds a sensual air to them.

The fact that the breasts are exposed does not bring any disrepute, as breasts nourish children, and the human body is the temple of the soul. There is nothing immoral or harmful about it.

Friends, human modesty does not apply to our entities, which are free. In African civilizations, exposed breasts are completely natural; hence, this portrayal of *Pomba-giras* as sensual, unashamed women with a certain sexual appeal (since *Exu* also works in this area) was assigned. Do not cover the breasts of *Pomba-giras*; let us not bow to this hypocritical society that follows the dictates of the church, for it is people from the church imposing this! *Pomba-gira* represents the human side of all of us. You should see them as they are; if someone does not like it, they can simply not look.

We must never abandon the origin of an *orixá*; soon, we will want to make diet offerings for *exus* because it is trendy.

I believe that what has been done for many years should not be changed due to lay opinions.

Despite the small difference in the results, in general, the proponents of “covered breasts” seemed to have more solid arguments when considered as a whole. Thus, Henrique leaned towards “covered breasts,” while striving to maintain the tradition of sensuality. Below are two images of the same *Pomba-gira*, the old one on the left and the new one on the right, with the breasts partially covered by the hair:

Figure 7 – On the left, the image of *Pomba-gira* is one of the oldest and does not refer to a specific *Pomba-gira*. This image was extracted from the physical catalog of IB (no. 09 A), produced in 2021. On the right is the new representation of *Pomba-gira*, with breasts partially covered by hair, as displayed on the IB website



Source: Company website. Available at: <https://www.imagensbahia.com.br/pomba-gira>. Accessed on: 06/27/2023.

The photo on the left was taken from the printed catalog since the image is not listed on the website. According to Henrique, it is no longer sold and has been discontinued. In the same context, the *Pomba-gira Rainha das Sete Encruzilhadas* received a new version. The older version features fully exposed breasts and a wide hip, while the new version has less exposed breasts and a less voluminous body. Both versions are currently available on the website.

Figure 8 – On the left, the image of *Pomba-gira das 7 Encruzilhadas* with exposed breasts. On the right, the new version with covered breasts



Source: Company website. Available at:

https://www.imagensbahia.com.br/busca?category_id=73&term=pomba+gira+7+encruzilhadas&from=0&size=24. Accessed on: 06/27/2023.

The feminine appears to have a closer connection with the body and clothing. The research indicates this, but in an interview, Henrique had mentioned requests for more elegant dresses for *Pomba-gira* images, such as the suggestion to add more sophisticated details to the dress of *Pomba-gira Maria Mulambo*, theoretically one of the less vain *Pomba-giras*. Henrique complied with the request, finding a compromise by adding some gold to the costume.

Figure 9 – New image of *Pomba-gira Maria Mulambo* with a dress featuring gold patches



Source: Author's collection, 2023.

Final considerations

Analyzing the production and commercialization of plaster images of Umbanda entities by *Casa de Velas Santa Rita* and, in particular, by *Imagens Bahia*, it is observed that the early representations of *Pomba-giras* and *Exus*, with their characteristics of nudity, explicit sexuality, zoomorphism, and appearance reminiscent of Christian demons, provide elements for the aesthetic formation of *Umbanda*. In this formation, immanence, the body, sensuality, and pleasure emerge as intrinsic values to the Umbanda tradition. However, these representations and values have been materialized in various ways, depending on the variations of *Umbanda* and other African-derived religions.

Even during periods of official persecution, there have always been discreet spaces dedicated to the worship of *Exus* and *Pomba-giras*, often located in hidden corners at the entrance of *Terreiros*, almost imperceptible. However, changes in the perception of sexuality over time have allowed these entities greater visibility, enabling them to occupy large altars and entire rooms dedicated to their worship. Additionally, devotees may have images of these entities in their own homes. The phenomenon of the “new sacred feminine” has also contributed to the inclusion of images of *Pomba-giras* and *malandras* mixed with female entities from various pantheons.

Despite the current sexual freedoms, the flexibilization of previously non-negotiable binaries (good/evil, female/male, sacred/profane, Christian/other), and the greater freedom of

worship that Umbanda enjoys today compared to its past of extreme persecution, idiosyncrasies emerge in all religions. Paradoxically, some *Umbanda* insiders themselves call, in a way, for modesty. Curiously, in the case of Umbanda, it is the progressives who request that the breasts be covered and that *Exus* be given the appearance of ordinary humans, while traditionalists advocate for exposed breasts and the preservation of *Exu* images with monstrous characteristics. The plaster images materialize and highlight both sides of this discussion, demonstrating how religions are immanent, despite common perceptions that view religions solely as transcendence.

Similarly, plaster images trigger a confrontation between two different aesthetic formations: one Christian and the other Afro-Brazilian, which overlap in more or less conflicting ways. Against the liberation of *Pomba-gira* and the importance attributed to bodily pleasure, there remain remnants of a Christian aesthetic formation that teaches the denial of the body. This formation has the advantage of occurring in the early years of Brazilian children, making it more difficult for positive body representations to take root. This aspect is often obscured by concerns about how others (laypeople or adherents of other religions) will perceive and judge one's religiosity. However, the nudity of the *cabocla* images has not been questioned, possibly because it is not associated with bodily pleasure and sexual liberation, although indigenous, Amerindian, and African peoples did not approach sex in Christian terms. Perhaps here the widespread stereotype of Rousseau's "noble savage" is still in play.

Another crucial aspect in the creation of plaster images is the influence of new media, which subtly shapes new shared imaginaries and, consequently, new references regarding gender, sexuality, and religiosity. Secular aesthetic standards, disseminated through social media, have permeated and influenced previously established aesthetic standards in religious contexts. The need to negotiate with new technologies is not new to religions; as Merleau-Ponty (2011) noted, religions are embedded in the world, and technologies are an inseparable part of that world. However, digital technologies have exponentially increased the number of communication channels, so that changes caused by these technologies are perceived with greater frequency and intensity, surprising religions as they face certain arbitrarinesses to which they must respond.

Certainly, the discussions surrounding plaster statues are also due to the relatively young age of Umbanda (in relation to so-called "world religions") and its low level of institutionalization, aspects that allow for a great deal of innovation. *Umbanda's* "saints" emerge from popular devotion, with no canonization or other top-down regulatory processes.

This aspect allows for the emergence and incorporation of different social formations and types. In different historical contexts, culture (popular), religion, and social construction combine and recombine into aesthetic formations. Similarly, in a continuous and contrary flow, aesthetic formations produce culture, religion, and social construction.

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CRediT Author Statement

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Mr. Henrique Dias from Imagens Bahia for all the collaboration with the research.

Funding: Not applicable.

Conflicts of interest: There are no conflicts of interest.

Ethical approval: Not applicable.

Availability of data and material: The interview data were recorded and can be requested.

Author contributions: Sole authorship.

Processing and editing: Editora Ibero-Americana de Educação.
Proofreading, formatting, normalization and translation.

